

European Cities & Sustainable Urban Planning Practices

Rebecca Finkes | City & Regional Planning
STEP Faculty Mentor: Kareem Usher

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

I used my STEP funding to study sustainable urbanism in Europe for a whole MONTH this past May. The trip was through the Knowlton Sustainable Urban Planning Practices program which traveled to Copenhagen, Berlin, and Barcelona. This study abroad program focuses on environmentally, economically, and socially friendly planning practices in these innovative European cities. The curriculum of this study abroad experience was centralized around three main projects:

Urban Design Case Studies: In each city we visited we were assigned different public spaces to observe and analyze through the lens of the visual, social, morphological, and functional dimensions. We took photographs, sketched, people watched, and even reflected on how we used the spaces ourselves. This was intended to develop a holistic understanding of how users interact with the space based on the urban design. It was interesting to see how these ideas translated in the context of three difference countries.

Photo Journal: Over the course of the trip, each of us was tasked with analyzing a specific topic of our choosing and documented this topic through photographs. I chose playgrounds because I found the presence of quality public space catered to children to be unique to the European cities we visited. I noticed planners and designers made a point to make spaces for children that were held to the same standard as spaces for adults. Successful planning requires inclusivity, even for the literal little guys.

Personal Reflection: At the end of the trip we had a group discussion about how it had impacted each of us personally. We discussed our favorite memories, the different foods we tried, and how we had learned from each other. This was finalized in a written reflection that highlighted our favorite experiences.

These assignments were compiled into a final 286-page book that documented the group's collective experience. It was a lot of work, and I took the lead on the design of the book. The trip was more than a purely academic experience though and pushed me to grow personally as well. This was done through critical thinking, exposure to new cultures, and leadership development.

WHY THIS PROJECT?

Sustainable urbanism offers a comprehensive approach at making the world a better place with the environment, economy, and equity in mind. It's something the world needs in order to design cities that cater to healthy environments, economies, and equity. I chose this trip because it was a month of immersion of this very concept. Rather than learning about sustainable practices solely in the classroom, this opportunity allowed me to experience successful examples firsthand. This enhanced my experience at Ohio State by adding value to my degree I could not attain from lecture based curriculum. I knew this trip would align with my ultimate goal in life, to make the world a better place, through application of my newly developed knowledge in my future career. I was also especially interested in the personal growth I would undergo with being abroad for an entire month. It was something that was really intimidating, and I wanted to push myself to overcome those nerves. It was the most perfect opportunity for personal transformation that Ohio State had to offer for me and my interests.

TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCE

This trip made me really grow in a way that I wasn't able to back home. I was forced out of my comfort zone, which I admittedly didn't like at first. Most European restaurants-at least all that I visited- do not serve Kraft mac n cheese, my mom was in an entirely different time zone, and I don't speak more than maybe 3 phrases in any language other than English. Despite all of this, I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. I had so much fun adventuring in the cities we visited. Copenhagen's winding pedestrian streets, Berlin's historical preservation, Barcelona's chaotic city center- it all came together to define one of the most incredible months of my life. The diversity I was exposed to on a daily basis was so humbling in the sense that it reminded me that it isn't such a small world after all. There is so much to see and learn and understand, and it's so easy to forget that. From speaking to a Gambian refugee we ran into at a park in Berlin about his experiences and hardships to the freedom I felt biking around Copenhagen with almost literally no care in the world, this trip was surreal.

I learned about successful spaces by being in them and seeing firsthand what they look like, what they feel like- I finally truly understand what it means to plan for people. I heard from practicing professionals what I can do with a career in city planning to make that positive impact that drew me towards planning as a major in the first place. I saw some incredible architecture, climbed a HUGE mountain, and substituted ice cream for dinner countless times. I found comfort in the time I was able to explore on my own, and learned to appreciate being alone. I also learned a lot about being a leader- which is definitely a lot more difficult being in another country.

This trip impacted me so much more than I ever could have imagined. It equipped me with invaluable knowledge and skill sets. My critical analysis of public spaces in these cities can be cross referenced with my experiences in cities in the United States, which will provide me with a distinct perspective in my future career. The self-confidence and adaptability that came with a month of traveling in an entirely foreign space with strangers has already positively impacted me personally. I learned A LOT that I could have never read in a book. City planning is something I am very passionate about, and the month long immersion in it was so good to me. I am so thankful for what this month taught me- about planning and myself. I know it will be a lasting impact I carry with me the rest of my life.

